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Development of Qualification and Recognition System of Learning: The Case of Korea

Kim Shinil

1 Introduction

As the concept of lifelong learning has become a rapidly developing reality throughout the world, frameworks for qualification and recognition of learning outside the school environment are emerging as major practical concerns and areas of research interest in many nations (See OECD, 2003; World Bank, 2002; DfEE, 1998).

Korea is one of the nations that have made a degree of effort in developing a framework for a nationally recognized qualifications system. While nation-wide qualification systems have been developed throughout the world during the last decade, debate on qualifications has become increasingly important, internationally as well as nationally.

Although a growing interest in qualifications of learning seems to be a recent phenomenon, it should be noted that the whole notion of "qualifications" has strong historical and cultural roots in Korea. The development of the qualification system in Korea can be better understood with consideration given to the historical and cultural background of education in Korea. In this paper, I will describe the qualification system as it has developed historically in Korea whilst considering the current development of the system. I would like to share with you the historical experiences of Korean education in the Asian context of a nation-wide system for recognizing people's learning activities.

In doing so, I would define the concept of education as the management of learning activities. In a broad sense, there are two principal methods in the management of learning activities: direct management and indirect management. Schooling is considered as a typical example of direct management of people's learning, while the state examination system might be recognized as a mechanism of indirect management. This paper attempts to reveal how the governments of old Korean dynasties successfully managed, and controlled in a sense, learning activities of people within the kingdom through the state examination system with a limited number of schools.

2 State Examination System in Korean History

For a long period of time, Korean education had been characterized by a state examination system rather than by a school based system. As early as the 10th century, the Koryo dynasty neglected the policy of developing a school system

and began to administer the state examination system adopted from China. The examination system continued in operation for about 500 years during the Koryo dynasty. The Choseon dynasty which succeeded the Koryo in 1388 reinforced the examination system even more strongly instead of building up the school system during the next 500 years of the reign, ending in 1910. It was only in the early years of the dynasty that Choseon demonstrated any real degree of effort in establishing state schools.

Since there was a great shortage of state schools, people were forced to rely upon private schools which they had to establish by themselves. From the 10th Century, small self-help schools began to be established at the village level by the people themselves. "Seodang" or village schools of an elementary level consisting of 10-20 students with one teacher, rapidly spread to villages all over the country. In other words, they were self-help private schools. Seodang provided a basic education of reading, writing, and introductory classes on the Chinese classics.

A limited number among the young people who finished Seodang education continued their study at "Seowon" or private high schools that local communities established and maintained voluntarily in order to provide educational opportunities for young men of promise in each community. Seowon that flourished during the Choseon dynasty might be described as a voluntary organization of local learners with a master teacher. Over time, a number of Seowon were granted Royal support including exemption from taxation and military service. Additionally, students enjoyed self-government within the Seowon compound, like university autonomy in old Europe. These private schools, Seodang and Seowon proliferated throughout the Koryo and Choseon dynasties.

It should be stressed that both Seodang and Seowon were voluntary institutes of education founded and operated by local people, not by state or local authorities, or temples. People wanted to provide learning facilities for their children and young people, and occasionally for themselves. It meant that the idea of a formal public school system was not widely understood or accepted. From the 10th through 19th centuries, only a few schools were maintained by Kings or local governors with an exception in the early period of the Choseon dynasty when the King ordered local governors to establish Hyanggyo or high schools.

People carried on their learning activities not only at Seodang and Seowon but also at home independently. A large number of men engaged in learning independently, usually within the home or at a remote private place. Not only young men but also adults devoted themselves to self study. Those people had managed their learning by themselves. In other words, they were self-learners preparing for the state examination. Historical documents reveal that it was not unusual that people over forty were devoted entirely to learning during this period.

Why did Koreans so devote themselves to learning in this way? It is worthy of note that the learning-oriented culture of Korea had been molded by the state examination system as well as by Confucianism.

First of all, I would make a point that a unique system of state examination encouraged people to engage in learning. The examination system reinforced the learning-oriented culture in Korea. Korea started to operate the state examination system as early as in the year 958 AD. Since then until the end of the 19th century, the examination system continued to be developed, sometimes with influence from China. It was the Choseon dynasty in the 15th century which built up the state examination system that eventually replaced the state schooling system. As a result, the opportunity to be educated at public schools was very limited.

The state examination system in the Choseon dynasty was comprised of three areas: the civil examination for recruiting civil officials, the military examination for recruiting military officers, and the specialist examination for qualifying professionals such as medical doctors, astronomers, interpreters, etc. Both the military and specialist examinations consisted of two stages respectively, while the civil examination consisted of three stages: provincial, central, and royal court.

The provincial or the first stage examination was divided into two tracks: one was the track of recitation of the classics and the other one was literary composition. The provincial examination was administered at each district by the local authority. Successful applicants of the provincial examination were qualified to take the central or the second stage examination at the capital city of Seoul. The central examination tested skills in the composition of three literary genre including poems and essays. Successful candidates of the central examination were qualified for the royal court examination after finishing their education at Seong-kyun-gwan, the state institute of higher education. Those who passed the royal court examination that tested competency of policy making were appointed to high ranks post of central government and were qualified to the aristocratic class. On the other hand, those who passed successfully were appointed to local authorities and recognized high status positions.

Therefore, the state examination system was the best and in fact the only way of gaining higher social status. It was one of the reasons why people were devoted to learning. In other words, the kings of the Koryo and Choseon dynasties effectively forced people to engage in learning by utilizing the state examination system rather than by expanding the school system. They utilized the mechanism of the examination system to manage, and to control sometimes, learning activities of people.

The state examination system of old Korea is somewhat similar to the situation nowadays of a qualification and recognition system for lifelong learning

that a number of nations have developed recently. The state examination system was virtually a system of qualification and a recognition of people's learning. At the same time, the examination system was an efficient instrument that facilitated self learning with a limited number of schools.

3 Cultural Background of Self Learning

Another factor that contributed to a learning-oriented culture in Korea was Confucianism. Self learning, a related concept of self-directed learning, is historically and culturally grounded in the Korean context. Korean culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism. According to Confucius, human nature is endowed from Heaven. With this divinely endowed human nature, there are already innate virtues. These virtues which need to be cultivated, are the source of one's self, and the power of self-growing.

The divinely inspired cultivation of innate virtues within social contexts is closely connected to the concept of 'self learning.' In accordance with one's own endeavors in the field of learning, a human being can make oneself either an inferior person or superior person. In brief, one who persistently engages in learning can become a superior person.

It can be said that the Confucian perspective is humanistic for the reason that it sees a person as playing the central, creative role in the transformation one's life, society, and the world. Self learning is aimed at the cultivation of one's personal life, to repossess a clear character, and to return to the original, true self so that to contribute to developing a good society.

In the classics of Confucian philosophy, a great deal of discussion concentrates on philosophies, principles, and methodologies of learning. 'One of Confucius' major works, the Great Learning, begins with "Ways for great learning" And the Analects begins with "learning" and ends with "knowing".

Korea has been frequently described as one of the typical Confucian societies where learning is highly respected. Actually, studying classics and literature, whilst paying attention to contemporary issues was an important part of daily life of men of the upper class and, to a less extent, of common people. It is contended that learning has been a major part of Korean culture.

It was in this historical context that Yi Yulgok (1530-1584), one of the great Confucian scholars in the Choseon dynasty, wrote many books on philosophy and education. Yi Yulgok wrote a book titled Hak Gyo Mo Beom, or Guidebook for the Self-Learner. He emphasized lifelong learning not only for noble men but also for common people. In his book, Gyeok Mong Yo Gyeol, or Essential Ways to Conquer Ignorance, offered some advise in detail about learning activities, not teaching activities. In his Guidebook for Self-Learners, he presented 16 rules for learners, as following (Yi, 1972:111-119):

Setting the aims of learning and life; Caring conduct and behavior; Reading; Speaking with prudence; having an impartial attitude; Respecting parents; Respecting teachers; Fraternity; Conduct in the family; Human relationships; Taking examinations; Maintaining justice; Virtue and courage; Acting with prudence; Observing rules in places of learning; and Regular reading of rule books for learners.

Among the 16 principles, the first principle said, "Every learner has to set themselves the aim of learning and life from the very beginning. Yi Yulgok stressed the autonomy of the learner.

4 New Systems of Qualification of Learning

After 10 centuries of an examination-oriented learning society, a modern public school system was introduced to Korea at the end of the 19th century. This school system replaced the state examination system. At present, nearly all young people enroll at schools and higher education institutes of one form or another. Enrollment rates of secondary education and higher education have reached almost 100 percent and 75 percent, respectively. In other words, the nation state now controls learning activities of young population through state-controlled schooling. However, it should be noted that an examination-oriented culture has been maintained until even today, only the immediate context or delivery system being different.

In the meantime, the pendulum is swinging back again. As a concept of lifelong learning began to take shape in the latter part of the 20th century, education systems began to undergo a degree of transformation throughout the world. In many countries, the transformation of the education system has been accelerated by the national plan of education reform. Korea is one such country.

In Korea, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform or PCER formulated a national plan of education reform in 1995. The PCER advocated that the aim of educational reform was to get rid of a closed schooling system so that a new educational system could enable every person to learn what he or she wanted to learn at any time and any place. It might be called an open lifelong learning policy for society.

In an open lifelong learning society, learning opportunities are made available to every citizen throughout their whole life span. This is possible only when a society provides diverse opportunities of learning by all types of formal and non-formal education that is open to everybody at any time and any place. At the same time, individuals and groups should be allowed to pursue learning activities in their communities and work places as well as in schools and universities and indeed should be supported in doing so. Therefore, in the basic theme of the reform plan for this new educational system it was essential to lay the foundations

of an open lifelong learning society.

When the PCER reform proposal came out, an OECD examination team was organized to evaluate Korean education. After reviewing the proposal, the examiners made a point that Korea considered lifelong learning as a priority, as stated:

The commitment to lifelong learning in the ERP [Education Reform Proposals] is boldly comprehensive. It endorses the view, now widely held in industrialized societies, that formal educational experiences must be made available for adults as well as for children and teenagers at any time during their lives. It endorses the central tenet of open learning that learning opportunities should be accessible at any time, at any place, and through a variety of means and media (OECD, p. 21).

In the meantime, the reform proposals were legislated into new laws in 1997. Three main laws, namely elementary and secondary education law, higher education law and lifelong education law are posed in parallel under the umbrella of the Basic Law of Education. The Lifelong Education Law that replaced the Adult Education Law was passed in the National Assembly in 1999.

Reflecting the Constitution's commitment to lifelong education as well as the spirit of a 'right to learn' of the people, the Lifelong Education Law laid the foundations of the 'open lifelong learning society.' The main features of the law may be summarized as follows.

- * Accreditation of adult and continuing education
- * Qualification of self learning
- * Educational Credit Bank System
- * Financial assistance to adult education providers through learners
- * Paid learning leave
- * Training and placement of lifelong education specialists
- * Inter-ministerial coordination of lifelong education

Among the ingredients of the above prescriptions, the first three items are the schemes concerning qualification of learning.

Perhaps one of the most ambitious plans among the PCER proposals is an accreditation scheme of adult and continuing education. With the accreditation scheme, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development recognizes the conferment of college degrees by diverse institutions of non-traditional higher education including cyber universities and corporate colleges.

Another scheme of qualification is the Bachelor's Degree by Self Learning. The Bachelor's Degree by Self Learning was introduced in 1990 to recognize self learners who did not enroll at higher education institutes. This is a system that the State Authority recognizes self learning by a series of examinations towards

obtaining a bachelor degree. The examinations consist of three phases: general, specialization step I and specialization step II. When the learners successfully pass every examination, a bachelor's degree is awarded by the Minister of Education and Human Resources Development. About 800 persons are awarded the degree every year.

The Educational Credit Bank System to recognize records of out-of-school education through qualification procedures was established in 1997. This scheme has been designed to recognize records of learning performed by individuals at any time and any place throughout their lifetime. People can utilize accumulated credits to satisfy the requirements for obtaining a Bachelor's degree or diploma, or for obtaining licenses of professions such as computer programmer and electronic technician. A total of 13,650 persons obtained college degree through the credit bank system since this system was introduced. The number of learners participating in the system has rapidly increased; 59,786 persons enrolling in 175 fields of study as of 2003.

On the other hand, another scheme of qualification is under way of development for various vocational skills by the Korean Institute of Vocational Education and Training in cooperation with work places. I expect that a nation-wide, and most likely global, framework of qualification will emerge in the near future, to augment the formal schooling system considerably.

In conclusion, I would like to bring up several issues and tasks for discussion concerning the qualification system.

- 1 How to guarantee high standards with keeping diversity of qualifications.
- 2 How to help self-management of learning activity.
- 3 How to assist lifelong design of career and learning.
- 4 How to encourage early school leavers to engage in learning.
- 5 How to cope with increasing commercialization of education.
- 6 How to keep local standards in balance with global standards of qualifications.
- 7 How to govern the lifelong learning system, nationally as well as globally.
- 8 How to develop and operate an Asian Network of Learning

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